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Testimony
Before the Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks
United States House of Representatives

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 432, H.R. 481, and H.R. 1492
April 14, 2005

Mr. Chairman, thank you for scheduling a hearing on H.R. 1492. I greatly appreciate your interest in this important legislation as well as the opportunity to discuss it with the Subcommittee today. I also wish to thank Representatives Doris Matsui and Mike Honda for agreeing to be original cosponsors of this important legislation.

Very simply, this legislation is designed to provide the structure and resources necessary for citizens, schools, communities, and others to undertake projects in order to preserve and interpret an aspect of American history that many, quite frankly, would much prefer to ignore or never know. Nations, as do people, have the opportunity to recognize their mistakes and use the lessons learned from those mistakes to improve themselves. However, to do so, the mistake must not only be recognized, the lesson must be learned and remembered.

The United States of America has recognized the terrible mistake it made between 1942 and 1945, when pursuant to Executive Order 9066, over 120,000 Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes and detained in government assembly and then relocation centers. Moreover, this mistake taught the United States that racial prejudice and wartime hysteria do not justify the denial of human dignity and the fundamental freedoms afforded by the U.S. Constitution. Thus, the legislation before the Subcommittee today is designed to help ensure the United States and, more importantly, its citizens never forget the lesson learned from this mistake; the details of this mistake are well documented in the book, Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese Relocation Sites, by Jeffrey F. Burton, Mary M. Farrell, Florence B. Lord, and Richard W. Lord.

Those who do not know the facts of this aspect of American history are undoubtedly quite surprised to learn that the U.S. government, while rightly fighting to preserve freedom throughout the world, on March 2, 1942, wrongly declared over 100 areas in the states of Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington as “prohibited areas” to those of Japanese ancestry. According to Confinement and Ethnicity, over 9,000 people voluntarily moved out of a prohibited area and about half of these people, who had been informed by the U.S. government that it was not planning on placing restrictions or prohibitions on the area they were moving into, were later forcefully evacuated. Others who wanted to voluntarily leave the prohibited areas could not either, because their assets had been frozen at the beginning of the war or because other states were unwilling to accept them as residents.

On March 24, 1942, the U.S. Army began to evacuate residents of the prohibited areas; the evacuees included newborns, children, even those who had been adopted by non-Japanese parents, and the elderly. Sadly, those being evacuated were given just six days notice and, as they could only take those items the family could carry, were forced to dispose of nearly all of their possessions, often for ridiculously small sums. In addition, and of particular importance in California, people were not given the opportunity to harvest their crops; in fact, the only act of “sabotage” by a Japanese American occurred when a farmer plowed his strawberry crop under when his request for the opportunity to harvest it was denied.

As they waited to be transported to one of 10 “relocation centers,” the evacuees were temporarily housed in 17 assembly centers in Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington, 13 of which were in California. One of those 13 was located at the Tulare County Fairgrounds in Tulare, California, which I formerly represented. The assembly centers were surrounded by barbed wire fences, which were patrolled by military police, and consisted of hastily constructed military barracks, with separate communal bathrooms and dining halls. However, thousands of people, including 8,500 at Santa Anita alone, lived in horse stables at the Santa Anita and Tanforan assembly centers in California.

By the end of October, the evacuees were moved by train into one of the following 10 relocation centers or internment sites: Jerome and Rohwer in Arkansas; Colorado River (Poston) and Gila River in Arizona; Tule Lake and Manzanar in California; Granada in Colorado; Minidoka in Idaho; Heart Mountain in Wyoming; and Central Utah (Topaz). Like the assembly center, the relocation centers were surrounded by barbed wire fences but also had guard towers. The centers were designed to be self-contained and self-sustaining communities. Like the assembly centers, they primarily featured barracks type housing. In addition, the relocation centers were dusty, muddy, and often subject to extreme temperatures. Finally, the use of the Japanese language was restricted.

In December 1944, the U.S. government announced the relocation centers would be closed within a year. While nine closed before the end of 1945, Tule Lake was not closed until May 1946 because it continued to hold those who had renounced their U.S. citizenship. Unfortunately but not surprisingly, the government provided only minimal assistance to those who it had wrongfully detained as they left the centers to rebuild their lives.

As I have stated, the U.S. government has admitted its mistake in this instance. It has sought to make some degree of recompense to those evacuated by paying reparations and issuing a formal apology; a memorial has been constructed in Washington, DC, within sight of the Capitol. In addition, six of the relocation centers are listed on the National Register, Manzanar and the cemetery at Rowher are National Historic Landmarks, and Minidoka is a National Monument. As a result of legislation (P.L. 102-248) I cosponsored and worked with my former colleague Representative Mel Levine to enact, Manzanar, which I formerly represented, has been established as a National Historic Site. With regard to the assembly centers, seven, including the one in Tulare, do not have some form of marker or plaque to remind future generations of our past wrong.

While the legislation before the Subcommittee today certainly is designed to authorize the funding necessary to facilitate projects that involve bricks and mortars (for example, the construction of a museum at Granada or the stabilization of a hospital chimney at Heart Mountain), its intent is not to completely reconstruct or restore the infrastructure at every relocation site or assembly center for the sake of show and tell. Rather, the legislation is designed to be as flexible as possible in recognition of the wide differences in the current conditions at the pertinent sites of historic significance, as well

as to allow for grantees to conduct a wide variety of projects in many different forms to ensure the lesson taught by the sites is preserved forever. For instance, a project could be as simple as a citizens group buying and placing a plaque on a stable; another could involve an effort by students to collect, preserve, and interpret the memories of surviving evacuees, a generation we are rapidly losing.

This flexibility is necessary and recognizes that the only common thread that binds the sites related to the confinement of Japanese Americans is Executive Order 9066. As with each of the fifty states, which are bound together by the U.S. Constitution, each of the sites has its own unique history and characteristics. Thus, the preservation projects needed that would be undertaken with monies authorized under H.R. 1492 necessarily must be unique to the individual sites.

Finally, the legislation provides the U.S. Secretary of the Interior with the flexibility to approve projects related to sites other than the 10 relocation and 17 assembly centers. An example of such a site is the Crystal City World War II Alien Family Internment Camp in Texas, which was run by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and which housed Japanese immigrants and nationals sent to the United States from Latin America.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the Subcommittee's consideration of this legislation. I look forward to working with you to see it enacted into law.